



The future lost and how to reclaim it

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Democracies are living on borrowed time, argues Jan Zielonka in his recent book. Inequalities brought by globalisation and capitalism, digital acceleration, misuses of technological innovations and devastating climate changes put the world on a straight course to a catastrophe—which will occur if we do not act now. Written in a business journalism style, peppered with satiric cartoons and full of pop cultural references, *The Future Lost* grapples with this predicament and attempts to answer a serious and broad question: why the future is lost, and what should we do about it?

Zielonka tackles problems with a broad brush. Hardly any thought is given more than a paragraph, so the author meanders from such abstract topics like time, space, acceleration, to more contextualised problems of non-majoritarian institutions, capitalism, uses and misuses of the past, globalisation. This makes the book a bumpy read, where absolutely pedestrian observations on the connectivity capacities of the internet are mixed with more nuanced reflections about paradoxes of plural identities. In addition, the author has a stylistic tendency to pose a set of broad questions like: ‘Why there is a market for extremism? Why do so many people not trust science? Why are we so terribly policed on and off social media?’ (p. 184). Answering each of them should require an elaborated paper, but instead Zielonka leaves them afloat. Thus, they do not invite reflection, but rather cause irritation, at least for this reader. Moreover, his introductory chapters on time and space, intended as content-framers, are a composite of unstructured thoughts that obscure rather than enlighten discussed problems—and even Zielonka abandons this framework in the next chapters.

But the core of Zielonka’s argument lies in the recognition of a nation-state as the main culprit for present problems. The author doubts in inherent state’s powers because of the state’s documented failures in migration politics, its responsibility for ‘screwing up’ globalisation (which is otherwise univocally positively associated with job creation, lower consumer prices, the spread of liberal ideals,

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p. 114), and its romance with market capitalism. The challenges of a fast-moving era of acceleration demonstrate democracy's short-sightedness and prove democratic architecture unfit for designing tenable solutions for potential future calamities. In other words, Zielonka is an advocate of long-terminism and tries to find novel arrangements and seeks to endow with power actors who would implement unpopular but far-sighted visions. But are nation-state democracies entirely wrong to privilege the current voters over the future generations? Zielonka is a fierce advocate of the future, but does not really justify this choice or offer even a sketch explaining how to detect high risks of the future. If today, as argues Zielonka, evidence-based policies are unpopular, how long-terminism would deal with scientific backlash?

Zielonka provides three reasons that explain why democracy is not equipped to deal with acceleration. Firstly, contemporary democracies succumb to the demands of profit-driven, neoliberal economics, 'in effect confining them to quick, futile fixes' (p. 95). National democracies have transformed into 'market-states' that are more occupied with providing opportunities for the citizens rather than with social redistribution. Secondly, democratic decision-making process is too formal and too slow to keep up with the new challenges. Thirdly, citizens 'feel too busy to engage in public affairs' (p. 96), partly because these public matters are too complicated 'even for experts', but also because some voters are myopic. Zielonka concludes his diagnosis of democracy by stating that the balance between the executive and the legislative is now skewed because of the dominance of emergency politics that prefers decrees and fast solutions over deliberations.

Zielonka's relationship with the nation-state is uneasy to say the least. Whenever he diminishes the state's role, he quickly adds that states are here to stay. But then he falls into obvious contradictions: on the one hand, state fell victim to global firms' logic of competitiveness; on the other hand, 'corporations would not be able to sabotage global efforts to combat climate change if brought to justice by states' (p. 130). State is a form of power of a by-gone era, but still equipped with instruments envisaging democracy and the rule of law. Zielonka accepts that there are no better solutions and the task now is to determine what states do well, and what could be managed by other actors.

All the hope is in networks, claims Zielonka. Network is defined by examples: networks of cities, NGOs, internet-generated networks, the European Union and the United Nations. Clearly, abstract networks have for Zielonka more appeal than old-fashioned states: though states are more efficient and enjoy legitimacy, networks are more flexible and adaptive. States are sovereign territorially bounded actors, whereas networks ignore sovereignty claims. Networks are transparent, 'they respect the law and their own codes of conduct' (p. 199). Pondering on the problem of network-state relationship, Zielonka writes that states ignore networks' expertise. To back up this claim, the author quotes Bill Gates' TED talk from 2015 about the forthcoming pandemic, and the NGOs that warned about Putin's expansionist agenda since the annexation of Crimea—and both these warnings, if taken seriously, could have saved people's lives, according to Zielonka. But it seems that the actors that had the



most to say with regard to Putin's politics were actually the states invaded by Russia: Ukraine or Georgia.

Because of democratic short-terminism, Zielonka considers networks of cities and NGOs as more committed 'to long-term future objectives such as climate change' (p. 172), what of course begs a question about NGOs that do not necessarily treat climate problems as their priority (e.g., the conservative Agenda Europe). Although Zielonka warns that the system of state's democratic accountability is not well designed (because of the lack of extensive control over the elected officials), he still builds his solutions on the very same democratic architecture. The suggested way of amending the problems with state democracy is to include the non-state actors into 'certain forms of networked governance' (p. 205). It remains unclear how exactly the upgraded governance would look like and if it would remedy the accountability problems diagnosed by Zielonka. I cannot find convincing arguments why NGOs or any other actor dubbed as a network should enjoy greater accountability than the state, if it is clear even from Zielonka's analysis that they are not hierarchical or regulated.

Even though Zielonka stresses that these characteristics do not always fit neatly to the concepts, the EU—understood here as a network—completely falls out of this scheme. It is also quite surprising that Zielonka is not really preoccupied with the EU in this book. The clashes between the EU and member states regarding competences are visibly present; the EU is an autonomous order capable of issuing binding decisions (for instance, regarding limits on CO₂ emissions). Moreover, it seems that it is truly naive to believe in high transparency and genuine pursuit of law by networks—the EP Qatargate or algorithmic non-transparency and privacy breaches on social media platforms are just first examples at hand that prove networks' susceptibility to similar rule of law problems.

The solutions that Zielonka proposes are somehow abstract, if not naïve. He puts forward an idea to create Cosmopolis—'a multicultural global city inhabited by people who respect each other and try to save the planet' (p. 213). The exemplary communities of this kind are International Labour Organisation with a tripartite decision-making structure, and the council of Barcelona where the officials are deliberating together with ordinary citizens. Zielonka also suggests to introduce a second chamber of the European Parliament of non-state actors (cities, regions, NGOs) or empowering the NGOs in the UN. But these are the very same institutions that Zielonka denounces—the EU was not capable of contacting nationalism, whereas the UN allow autocratic states to vote. He even states that these projects 'are possibly broken beyond repair' (p. 214). I truly wonder if his word could be taken seriously if he undermines his very own solutions in one book.

Moreover, there are some worrying signs that the author does not even address the serious academic critique he received in relation to his previous publications. In this book, Zielonka echoes not only the question he posed some years ago with regard to the European Union (2014), but also his very answers. Accordingly, the world is not yet doomed, but it needs to regroup and create transnational polycentric networks of diverse actors that include cities, regions and NGOs. This solution to the disintegration tendencies, based on a neo-mediaeval framework, was rightly criticised for not taking the very powers dismantling the EU seriously enough: if



populist and xenophobic leaders are capable of destroying the transnational organisation of states, why then they would not hinder the creation of even more robust polycentric arrangements? The very same doubt relates to the solutions Zielonka puts forward in his new book, which does not bother to explain rationale behind endorsing the ‘Cosmopolis’. Overall, before choosing to read Zielonka’s new book, manage your expectations: it is rather an airport read rather than an engaging and groundbreaking position.

References

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